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ABSTRACT

The culminating remarks in this paper call for the building of a new Atlantis, a"...home where the unquiet heart of modern man can find peace." The author reviews the historical importance of Latin as a "connecting tissue" among European languages and its significance in the development of a common linguistic heritage. From this frame of reference, the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire and its eventual dissolution are examined. The rise of modern civilization and its values are then contrasted with the Latin culture, with particular emphasis on the centrality of Latin poetry in the historical development of national unity. The author concludes that the alienated modern man would do well to build a new Atlantis modeled after the Latin culture, a new society united by the common bonds of poetic tradition and linguistic unity. (RL)

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THE NEW ATLANTIS

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THE NEW ATLANTIS

In earlier meetings of teachers of Classics I have repeatedly called attention to the importance of Latin studies for a better understanding of our own language. We agreed that children could acquire higher communication skills by pushing through to the Latin roots basic to so many of the linguistic forms woven into the texture and fabric of our language. We have also emphasized the practical importance of these origins at the present stage of cultural development, where communication emerges as a critical concern. Today, however, I should like to examine another equally important aspect of humanistic studies, an aspect that is not confined to literacy in one language.

Latin elements are of course embedded in all the European languages, especially as concerns the formation of concepts of higher generality. In the various languages, however, Latin and non-Latin (Germanic or Slavic) elements show different combinations. For one thing, Latin words entered the vocabulary of modern European languages at different times; many of the later additions were introduced by Renaissance humanists bent upon developing a scientific or classicizing vocabulary. Other Latin elements

appear at an early date. The Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Sardinian, Italian, Romansch, and Romanian) represent a special case, since the bulk of their basic vocabulary consists of the linguistic stock of the spoken Latin of the Imperial Period. Likewise, the morphology and syntax of the Romance languages also have essentially developed from Classical Latin in continuous fashion. The Germanic and Slavonic languages, on the other hand, have had basic vocabularies, syntax, and phonemic structures of their own. Nevertheless, we find in these languages numerous Latin borrowings of an early date. Thus, the German words for window, street, buying, and many others are of Latin origin. The case of English is a very special one; besides early Latin acquisitions, including "way", "street", "bishop", and "church", we have an extraordinarily extensive secondary admixture of Romance elements incorporated in the Eleventh Century, as a result of the Norman conquest. It is this history that has determined the rather anomalous linguistic character of English. Regardless of these differences in the particular evolutionary route followed by the Latin and other elements of the various languages, the Latin elements constitute a commonly understandable, and understood, body of linguistic symbols. Although language differences do erect barriers between nations, the separation is neither total nor absolute, because a large number of Latin-derived expressions

is an international heritage possessed in common. Thus, moving from one language area to another, within the region whose historical antecedents ultimately revert to the Roman Empire, we never lose touch with Latin (and also, in part, Greek) words and other components since they form, as it were, a connecting tissue. Even an elementary study of Latin will make this connecting, unity-forming tissue stand out more vividly. I should like to say a few words about the significance of greater consciousness, higher awareness, of this unifying function of the common Latin heritage.

II. If we think about these surviving elements as still constituting a bridge between language communities, our thoughts are led back to a much earlier cultural configuration in which there existed not only a bridge or a number of dispersed stepping stones, but an entire continuous, unified continent. Latin and, in the eastern half of the Mediterranean and adjacent cultural area, Greek constituted a common linguistic medium satisfying communication needs of an extraordinary variety. This linguistic medium was used not only for communication about practical--economic and commercial--matters between remote geographical areas, but also for the preservation of a common cultural, poetic, literary, historic, and religious heritage.

Classical poetry as the backbone of general education was a peculiar cultural characteristic of the Hellenistic and Roman world. This made it possible for very large segments of the population to define their own identity in terms of a common body of poetic symbols or poetically recreated and elaborated myths. Thus, communication from one end of the Roman world to the other established not only pragmatic and utilitarian contacts, but also a deeper spiritual and emotional unity. The existence of such a common spiritual, aesthetic, symbolic medium had decisive significance, not only in the realm of "higher" culture, of art and education, but also for political life, for the question of peace and war. This is why in our own tormented times we have every reason to reflect upon the phenomenon of Latin as a universal cultural language.

Wherever the common poetic, mythical, educational tradition held sway, cultural unity also implied something infinitely precious: political unity, the sense of an all-encompassing imperial order. The Hellenistic and Roman world was completely pacified only for brief halcyon periods in the High Empire, the apogee of the Classical World, enshrined in the memory of the Great Emperors, Augustus to begin with, but also the great Second Century figures, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines. Apart from these culminating periods, there was plenty of turbulence in the Empire

which time and again seemed on the verge of breaking up, as rival power-holders and military leaders contested the imperial dignity among themselves. These struggles were complicated by warfare with the so-called Barbarian Kingdoms centered outside the confines of the Empire. Nevertheless, the military conflicts that ravaged the Empire did not have the character of total wars. The goal pursued by the contending military forces was not to establish separate sovereignties, erecting barriers among the people, but to exercise power within the overall symbolic framework of the Empire.

Total conflict is never merely a matter of redistributing material power, but also involves replacing one spiritual order by another. As long as the cultural, spiritual heritage of Antiquity maintained itself, unity was still dominant over division, regardless of destructive power struggles. It was the dissolution of the belief system and the symbolic universe of the classical world that set the stage for radical and thorough-going conflicts. The fading away of the Classical Roman political and religious tradition, and the emergence of the new spiritual universe of Christianity, posed a radical challenge to the existing order. It was a clash of absolutes that could have shattered the cultural values of the Old World beyond repair. Yet this did not happen. The cultural and spiritual unity of the Roman world was saved by the most extraordinary and

truly miraculous policy reversal known to history. Giving up all attempts to preserve the imperial cult, the Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as the dominant religion of the Empire. The Church was put under the protection of imperial power; as a result, its own teaching had to be adapted to the needs of the secular authority structure. One may lament the fact that the purity of the early Christian ethos was compromised when the Church, in a sense, became an organ of the state. What must be dressed in the present context, however, is that the religious reorientation of the Empire did not break up the continuity of the Greek-Latin cultural and educational tradition. It was decisive for later cultural developments that the educational institutions maintained by the Church preserved the core of the classical curriculum, side by side with their religious teaching.

The city of Rome ceased to be a political center after Constantine transferred his court to the new city of Constantinople. The Empire thereafter remained a going concern in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Imperium for more than a thousand years, but after a few generations the western part broke up into a number of new political units that no longer had any historical connection with the old Empire (e.g. the Merovingian French Kingdom). Nevertheless, the cultural unity of the former Imperial domain was preserved, or rather rebuilt on new foundations, by the

Roman Catholic Church whose organizational network, spreading over the European continent and beyond to Britain and Ireland, was the true successor of the Roman Empire. This familiar story is relevant to my subject because the communication medium of the new Church-based European system was the Latin language.

Latin, as a vehicle of communication and a medium of literary expression, had a far longer span of existence under the new religious dispensation than it had enjoyed under the Roman Empire itself. Medieval Latin as a kind of universal language is an exceptional cultural phenomenon. During the troubled period following the dissolution of the Empire, Latin was, at first, primarily the language of education. It was the educational system of the Church, with Latin as its language of instruction, that preserved large elements of the ancient poetic, rhetorical, and philosophical tradition alongside the religious curriculum. This determined the character of medieval Latin as a language, not just specialized for purposes of liturgy or even religious poetry but also capable of treating secular subjects on a high level of abstraction.

This linguistic unity of Western Europe once more served as a basis for political unity. The feudal medieval world was far more fragmented than the Hellenistic and Roman world had ever been, and armed conflict was endemic, but these conflicts were not total. Religious unity and

the existence of a single language of education prevented the erection of impenetrable barriers between self-contained political units. In spite of turmoil, Europe, until the end of the Middle Ages, was very much one world, and Latin education was the foremost symbol of that unity.

III. How did this unity break up? The process has often been described in terms of the rise of sovereign kingdoms, the precursors of the later nation states. All political and economic energies were increasingly concentrated within these new units--while the two universal institutional centers of the Middle Ages, the Papacy and the so-called Holy Roman Empire, were losing effective political power. In the present context, however, I should like to call attention to the cultural and linguistic aspects of the waning of the Middle Ages and the rise of modern Europe. The end of the story was the disappearance of Latin as the universal language of education, science, philosophy, and law. This, however, did not happen overnight. It was a very long process, the first stages of which involved practically no direct attack upon the use of Latin either in the Church or in the European Chancelleries and universities. The transformation of the linguistic consciousness of the European public began on a very different plane, that of poetry.

Poetry and song had of course always been cultivated in the vernacular. At first, however, vernacular folk poetry was placed in a category different from "Classic" poetry--that body of works deemed worthy of study in educational institutions. The cultural revolution of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, possibly triggered by Arab influences, consisted of the creation of literary languages based upon "vulgar" speech, vehicles of poetic expression exhibiting a very high level of artistic sophistication. Poetry was followed by prose--imaginative works treating exalted subjects of classical history, and also subjects pertaining to an idealized concept of personal and emotional life in the vernacular language (Roman de la Rose).

The new poetic and literary languages had an extraordinary inner strength, wealth and vitality. Under the very eyes of the guardians of classical tradition, a new body of modern classical poetry and literature came into being, the linguistic substance of which was an ennobled form of vernacular speech. The centers of this new development were in the princely courts of Western and Central Europe, and also in the rich trading cities of Italy, especially Florence. Social groups that did not go through the Latin educational machinery of Church and University provided the enthusiastic public for this modern classic literary art. Cultivated young men and women coming from these social

categories were active as connoisseurs, patrons, and dilettantes supporting the new cultural movement.

Over a series of generations, the great literary languages created by poets and imaginative writers (the Provençal troubadors, the German Minnesänger, the Italian poets of the "dolce stil nuovo" that culminated in the towering genius of Dante) relentlessly gained ground at the expense of Latin. During the Fifteenth Century, most theoretical and scientific works were still produced in Latin for an international public, while works in the national languages addressed themselves to Spanish, French, English, German, Italian, etc. readers. In fact, during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, there was even a false flowering of Latin writing, cultivated and propagated by humanist literati who replaced medieval Latin as their medium of expression by the artificially revived Ciceronian Latin of Classical Antiquity. This humanistic Classicist literature, however, did not enter into the mainstream of either imaginative or scientific European literature.

The Sixteenth Century Reformation opened the floodgates for an extraordinary body of writings in the national languages, ranging from translations of the Bible to theological and political works, and arousing passionate interest in a very wide reading public. The art of printing made available the first genuine mass medium of communication putting literary works within the reach of broad social

strata. Thus, Latin schooling became a minority affair, while the national languages came into use for written, that is, printed communication in every field, including administration, law and science.

The fructifying and energizing effects of this new development can hardly be overestimated. There were no longer any linguistic barriers hindering access to the highest forms of intellectual expression, either by members of the lower social strata, or by those of the upper middle and noble classes who were traditionally avoiding formal education in Latin. To be sure, Latin still had a large place in education, and all national literary languages acquired those large accretions from Latin mentioned above. The main communication medium, however, increasingly became the national literary language. National cultures, and the world culture, have been enriched beyond measure by the products of the poetic and literary giants of the great centuries of European writing since the beginning of the early modern period. In every other field of endeavor--science, technology, law, and so on--the use of the national languages led to extraordinary progress. We must, however, not overlook the other side of the coin. In fact, the explosion of intellectual, artistic energies in the modern period had to be underwritten at a costly price.

The old cultural and spiritual unity of the Continent was lost. With the advent of the self-contained national cultures, conflicts tended to become absolute and total. This became particularly pronounced after the French Revolution and the new political organization of Europe based upon popular sovereignty and the nation state. Awareness of the unity of Western culture with its classical antecedents receded more and more into the background. The Greek and particularly the Latin classics retained their honored place in the curriculum for a number of generations, but national poetry and history received increasing emphasis, and the classical tradition itself was cultivated no longer in a cosmopolitan spirit, but in a particularizing one. Eventually, the mightiest nation states proceeded to extend their domination over all non-European cultures with their different traditions for which there was no genuine understanding in the West. (Classical Greek Culture indeed was exclusive enough, stressing the line of separation between Barbarian and Greek, but it was far more hospitable to Oriental influences than to the emergent new flowering of the Occident.)

Tremendous, infinitely destructive, total conflict, rather than the hoped-for unity of mankind has marked the most recent stages of Western Civilization.

IV. Still, modern civilization did produce unifying trends of irresistible force. West and East, Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas are gradually becoming one world under the auspices of technology. The life of societies follows the same pattern everywhere in its industrial-scientific aspects. The great socio-economic inequities between the highly-developed industrial societies and those just entering the industrial stage are tragically conspicuous, but the spread of the urban-technological form of life, carried forward under the motto of "development", is an unmistakable fact. It would be wrong to belittle the progress that has been made and will be made in the future along these lines. Yet, the rise of the urban-technological society produced no spiritual and cultural unity. One of its salient features has been alienation, estrangement of man from man, the loss of meaning in human pursuits.

Science as the dominant spiritual force of the modern world burst upon the cultural scene as the bearer of an immense hope. Here, modern mankind felt, was something indubitably sure in the rationality of its intellectual foundations, and infinitely beneficial in its practical effects. Here was the fulfillment of a basic aspiration that had always eluded mankind: the aspiration toward a truly rational faith. Once this was secured, all the dark sides of human existence would vanish in the pure light of reason.

In that bright dawn of optimism nobody could foresee what a changed image science would show to mankind in the middle of the Twentieth Century. After Hiroshima, in particular, it stood for the ultimate in destruction, as well as for the ultimate in productive power. Instead of stilling all human doubts and anxieties, it created enormous, never anticipated, new misgivings. Science then manifested itself as more powerful than anybody ever expected, but it did not provide the inner peace of faith. Nobody could address science as St. Augustine had addressed God: "Fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te."

Besides the ideal of a rational faith as represented by science, the modern world also conceived the ideal of a rational social order, doing away with the heavy inequities and injustices of the stratified medieval order. The attack upon the inequities of the past culminated in the great triple slogan of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The arbitrary division of mankind into higher and lower orders was to be replaced by respect for the equal dignity of all men, as proclaimed also by the American Declaration of Independence.

The great human truths of freedom, equality and justice have not lost their inspiring force, but the task of implementing these principles turned out to be far more complex

than anticipated. Before the French revolutionary period was over, the principle of political equality turned out to be disappointing as long as it was not coupled with economic equality. The entire subsequent period was dominated by a social question: the problem of a just and equitable distribution of property and income.

Another fateful problem brought to the fore by political developments since the French Revolution was that of peace. A series of destructive wars cast doubt upon the validity of all proposed solutions to the problems of society--so long as the institution of war was not eliminated by a thorough reform of the international system.

All the basic political ideals and goal concepts of the historical period beginning with the French Revolution had the character of irrefutable truth and rationality, as long as they were put in general terms. There were some people who argued for, rather than against, such things as inequalities of social status and war, but these were eccentric minorities who could put their message only in the form of some desperate paradoxes. The weight of opinion was on the other side. Yet no real social and political consensus and unity were able to develop. While commanding nearly unanimous agreement in the abstract, the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and so on, could not be translated into any universally accepted action program.

In fact, the disagreements that arose among the people who shared the general principles of freedom, equality and the rest, but held different ideas on their practical implementation, proved deeper and more intractable than all other cleavages of opinion.

What went wrong? We are faced with a paradox: instead of vanishing, discord and strife have grown more total, more irreconcilable, since the "rational faith" achieved under the auspices of science, the "self-evident" principles of human equality (life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness), and the demand for a world order without national divisions and wars, became dominant in Western culture. How can this tragic paradox be explained and resolved?

V. Our reflections on the cultural unity of the ancient and medieval world suggest an answer. It is a surprising one, and the modern mind, complacently basking in the triumph of science and technology, may scoff at it. But here it is: The unity of the older cultural systems was based upon poetic symbols; the universal principles of the "one world", as we have it today, lack poetry. In spite of the immense strength it radiates, the modern cultural world in its unifying, universal aspects somehow lacks an inner life.

As against this, the relics of the old "Atlantis" sunk beneath the surface, the surviving linguistic elements of

Latin, preserve the traces of a cultural unity that was poetic in its essence. The great Latin poet Ovid said of himself: "Et quod temptabam scribere, versus erat;" in a sense, this could serve as a motto for the entire classical Mediterranean culture. Its key symbols were poetic ones, they spoke to human feelings on a deep level beyond abstract reasoning. It is from this source that the ancient world as well as the medieval world drew its synthesizing, harmonizing strength, its ability to surmount, to transcend the division and strife that is always present in human life. Fundamental myths, speaking to the imagination and feeling, were given a strong and memorable form by the classical body of literature. This gave the mental life of ancient society a strong articulation. Beyond whatever separated individuals and groups from one another, the basic treasury of mythical symbols served as a signal of recognition, a token of all sharing in the same collective identity.

I am not asserting that the entire body of poetic literature had this function of defining and cementing collective identity. I should only like to call attention to particular formulas, adages, and poetic quotations that achieved general currency. It seems to me that political societies can achieve integration only with the help of the poetic tokens of self-recognition permeating the entire educational and mass communication process. People cannot

achieve strong, effective bonds of unity except through shared, pregnant, memorable self-identifying symbolisms. This is what the great German poet Holderlin expressed by the line "Was aber bleibt stiften die Dichter" (What endures is founded by poets).

The cultural and political unity of modern nations likewise had its decisive, organizing, connecting tissue in poetic symbolism. Let us consider our own society, the United States of America. It would be a great error to suppose that the feeling of unity and self-identity achieved by this society originated essentially from pragmatic factors, the advantages that individuals were able to achieve for themselves. All this could unite but also divide the people. What could give them strong bonds of unity was a concrete imagery and poetic articulation of basic problems of national existence that enable Americans to recognize themselves in each other. We only need to think of the imagery of the Revolutionary War and the poetry of the Gettysburg Address. Once this symbolic tradition risks losing its appeal (as seems to be the case today), national unity is threatened in its nerve center.

All national literatures of the modern age have provided the unifying symbolic cement for their societies, but their integrating function could not, in the nature of things, go beyond national or linguistic boundaries. In the case of English, of course, the linguistic community

has multi-national character. But a poetic symbol system pervading an entire quasi-universal area of civilization--that was something historically unique to our old Atlantis.

Now, friends, colleagues, fellow-guardians of the classical heritage--here is the most significant, most challenging, most exhilarating task to which we can devote ourselves: bring to life Latin as a vehicle of poetic values. Since we must work under severe limitations of time, we can do the job only within a narrow compass. Let this not discourage us. Our sample of Latin language material may be small, but if it contains not only linguistic debris but also imperishable crystals of true poetic expression, the result will be a profound enrichment. What the student gains is a sense of belonging to the great world of humanitas, a world not contained within temporal and spatial limits. No educational goal can be higher than this, none can contribute more to the unity of feeling that our divided culture and society needs.

There must be some makeshifts and short cuts. Much of the classical heritage of myth, poetry, and poetic prose will have to be presented in translation, but we cannot content ourselves with that. Translations can provide only a framework for what really counts: the authentic voice of the poetic original. That true voice alone can overcome the fragmentation, the lack of wholeness, from which we

suffer. The teaching of Latin can contribute to the revival of a sense of human unity only if the main emphasis is put, not on "dead" linguistic materials, but on the poetic values conveyed by the medium of the language.

Let us, then, set our sights upon this supreme goal: building a new Atlantis, a home where the unquiet heart of modern man can find peace. Let the immortal song that once wove a magic wreath around all mankind sound once more. True human unity cannot be founded without poetry. The thing to do is to call the muses to help, as Dante did:

"Ma qui la morta poesi resurga,
O sante Muse, poi che vostro sono"---

"Here dead poetry must come to life again, O sacred Muses, for to you I belong"--let this be our motto, our vow, our dedication.